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NON-GOVERNMENTAL
ORGANIZATIONS

# Working with non-governmental organizations: operational activities for development of the United Nations system with non-governmental organizations and Governments at the grass-roots and national levels

## Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council the comments of the Administrative Committee on Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Working with non-governmental organizations: operational activities for development of the United Nations system with non-governmental organizations and Governments at the grass-roots and national levels" (A/49/122-E/1994/44).

* A/49/50.

** E/1994/100.

ANNEX

Comments of the Administrative Committee on Coordination

I. GENERAL COMMENTS

1. The Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) found the report to be a significant contribution to understanding an increasingly important dimension of the work of the United Nations system in the broad field of development, especially at a time when relationships between multilateral organizations, Governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were undergoing profound changes.

2. The members of ACC generally agreed with the view of the Inspectors that the present international situation and policies offered important opportunities for NGOs, Governments and development agencies to "form new partnerships" and to increase their cooperation. The report was, therefore, commended for providing a clear description of the situation and useful information on the subject of collaboration of the United Nations system with NGOs and Governments at the grass-roots and national levels in the area of operational activities for development, stressing both the constraints and opportunities for greater collaboration and emphasizing the need to strengthen national capacities and institutions, as well as the need to develop approaches for including NGOs in participatory programming processes. The report was also found useful as an input to the policy-level discussions, which were now taking place within the Economic and Social Council, on relations between the United Nations and NGOs.

3. A number of ACC members appreciated that the report refrained from dispensing prescriptions for collaboration with NGOs. They agreed instead that each member of the United Nations family should engage in sharing lessons of experience in collaboration with NGOs and use such findings as a basis for developing more effective approaches to cooperation that will benefit all concerned.

4. Some ACC members argued that, while it was important for organizations of the United Nations system to take the lead in catalysing Government/NGO collaboration, it must be emphasized that this was a long process that must be carefully nurtured, as trust and transparency were of paramount importance in building consensus. Experience has shown that the parties involved should move cautiously because of the diversity of NGOs at the national level and the fragility of grass-roots NGOs and the sometimes antagonistic stance between NGOs and Governments at the national level.

5. It was stated by some ACC members that it was important to note that NGOs were not the only organizations in civil society that should be drawn upon in the work of the United Nations system. Private for-profit organizations, as well as membership organizations such as labour unions, political parties, etc., could also be critical allies.

6. In the view of some ACC members, mention should have been made in the report of the fact that collaboration with NGOs at the country level was

constrained by the requirement for United Nations organizations to work directly with Governments.

7. Several ACC members expressed the wish that there should be a companion report containing a financial analysis and comparison of costs involved in United Nations/Government/NGO activities. They believe, for example, that it would be useful to know about the financial and human resources that have been devoted to the Partners in Development Programme of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Forest, Trees and People Programme of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). It would also be desirable to have a comparative chart showing the resource flows to grass-roots and national NGOs from the United Nations system and those being provided by developed country NGOs and such institutions as the European Community.

8. Some ACC members asserted that the global component of their mandate was preponderant and that therefore few of their activities could be decentralized as recommended in the report. Consequently, those members have limited opportunities for working with NGOs.

9. Some ACC members expressed their disappointment that the report focused only on operational activities for development at the field level and therefore covered only the United Nations bodies with operational activities to illustrate cooperation with NGOs. The United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat), for example, asserted that, during the past few years, it had steadily increased its collaboration with NGOs at both the programme design and implementation levels, involving them in the planning and execution of technical assistance projects and in research assignments, collaboration in meetings, seminars and workshops. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) noted that its activities as a co-sponsor of the inter-agency Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS) and a member of the Joint United Nations Information Committee (JUNIC), and its catalytic function for third-party activities in the field of the environment, would have deserved a mention. In the view of the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), it is at the grass-roots level that one must approach the drug issue, that is, above all through NGOs, which represent the most vital articulation of civil society. In that regard, UNDCP mentioned its assistance to the NGO anti-narcotics committees in New York and Vienna in the organization of a world forum, to be held in Thailand in 1994, on the role of NGOs in drug demand reduction.

10. Among other activities which had not been properly reflected in the report were those of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) related to convening a biennial conference of international NGOs on coordination matters with UNESCO, organizing biannual symposia, collective consultations of NGOs concerned with such areas as literacy, youth, higher education, family and human rights. Although collaboration with NGOs at the local level is central to the report, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) stated that its main non-governmental counterparts were the international NGOs, 97 of which had consultative status with UNIDO. In the view of UNIDO, its experience of collaboration with those NGOs deserved to be mentioned in the research of the Inspectors. The same relates to the activities of UNDP on improving policy dialogue between Governments and organizations of civil society through support

for national efforts to improve legislative and administrative frameworks for NGOs; assisting in the establishment and improvement of government structures for relations with NGOs, and vice versa; involving NGOs in major policy initiatives; and supporting their policy research and advocacy on themes that relate to United Nations system initiatives, etc.

## II. COMMENTS ON RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1

"Executive heads of each organization with operational activities for development, NGOs and Governments should consider the following basic steps (within the context of the situation, policies and programmes prevailing in each country) to build on and share experience and enhance multilateral agency/NGO/Government operational collaboration at the country and grass-roots levels:

"(a) Participative programming process: integrative programming which seeks actively to involve relevant NGOs in the formulation, implementation and assessment of development programmes in an ongoing and flexible process;

"(b) Delegation/decentralization: mechanisms to allow field representatives to work with NGOs and respond more flexibly and strongly to specific local needs, initiatives and opportunities in a country;

"(c) Guidelines: a distillation of experience, policies, ideas, procedures and requirements which allows field representatives to understand better how NGOs work and to facilitate collaboration with them;

"(d) Host Governments with NGOs: advice on approaches that field representatives can use to encourage and facilitate joint government/NGO efforts;

"(e) Southern with northern NGOs: advice on the differences, similarities and changing relationships of these two groups, as the basis for encouraging their collaboration."

11. Some ACC members commented that a major effort would be required on the part of the United Nations system to make available information on the structures, goals and resources of the relevant NGOs and of the types of cooperation that have proven successful. Other ACC members asserted that the global component of their mandate was preponderant. Decentralization, therefore, does not seem to be appropriate for all agencies. It was also noted that, while very welcome, some of the provisions of this recommendation had already been put into practice. It should therefore be added that future activities, meant to implement the above recommendation, should build on ongoing or past experience.

Recommendation 2

"Executive heads of each organization with operational activities for development, NGOs and Governments should consider actions at the following levels to build on and share experience and enhance multilateral agency/NGO/government operational collaboration:

"(a) Regional: establishing a focal point for operational collaboration at the regional level, which would also support collaboration in those countries where field representation for NGO work is lacking or very thin;

"(b) Global: establishing a central unit or focal point which provides overall policy, guidance and publications for operational activities with NGOs, with an emphasis on a mutual learning and dialogue process and close contact with the organizations' operational units that work with NGOs;

"(c) Policy-making: seeking ways to benefit from NGO grass-roots experience and perspectives by establishing regular, substantive consultations with them on operational issues and programmes and involving them more actively in special regional and global conferences on development issues;

"(d) Inter-agency: support for, interactions with and strengthening of the information and other activities of the United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service, a small inter-agency unit which has very well-established working relationships with northern, southern, and international development NGOs."

12. A number of ACC members noted that they were already well under way with the implementation of this recommendation, in particular the establishment of global and regional focal points. Several ACC members have central units or focal points as advocated in subparagraph (b) and have organized consultations along the lines suggested in subparagraph (c). Other members asserted that owing to the nature of their mandate and their organizational structure, it would be impossible to implement this recommendation. One organization said that it would establish focal points for operational collaboration at the regional level, as well as a central focal point to provide overall policy guidance for operational activities with NGOs.

13. As regards subparagraph (d), the Organizational Committee of ACC endorsed, in October 1992, the recommendation of the Joint United Nations Information Committee (JUNIC) that the Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS) should become a United Nations system jointly financed activity, based on voluntary and sustainable financial contributions.

Recommendation 3

"Executive heads of each organization with operational activities for development, NGOs and Governments should consider action in the following areas to build on and share experience, strengthen NGO capabilities and

support operational collaboration between multilateral agencies, NGOs and Governments:

"(a) Networking: identify relevant NGO networks and umbrella organizations and encourage and support their ability to strengthen NGO knowledge and capacities;

"(b) Databases and information exchange: establish and maintain databases or directories of NGO partners, the sharing of database information where possible, and a two-way "information culture" to keep collaborating NGOs aware of the plans and programmes of organizations while gathering useful information and ideas from the huge range of NGO information sources world wide;

"(c) Capacity-building and training programmes: support capacity-building and training opportunities at the field level and the capacity-building, research, and training programmes already well under way in the NGO sector world wide;

"(d) Evaluation: seek ways to harmonize and simplify evaluation procedures while maintaining proper reporting and accountability, encourage participative evaluation approaches and strengthen NGO understanding of and capacities for evaluation."

14. Several ACC members noted that the implementation of at least part of this recommendation was already well under way. Other ACC members gave information about their cooperation with, and support for, NGO networks. In particular, the strategy of UNDP with respect to capacity-building of civil society organizations is very much focused on the areas identified in this recommendation.

Recommendation 4

"ACC should take the lead in developing appropriate, harmonized and simplified guidance for funding, financial management and auditing processes with local development NGOs in order to help build NGO institutional capacities and strengthen collaborative development work."

15. ACC supported the call for harmonized and simplified guidance for funding, financial management and auditing processes in so far as collaboration with local development NGOs was concerned. There was a view, however, that the building of local development NGO institutional capacities, in general, was more appropriately carried out at the national level than through ACC.

Recommendation 5

"The Administrator of UNDP should:

"(a) Ensure that a focal point person is active in every possible field office to gather and disseminate information on development NGOs in-country, encourage new initiatives with NGOs and apply UNDP programmes in support of NGO capacity-building;

"(b) Update and reissue the 1987 and 1988 UNDP general guidance on collaboration with NGOs, in the light of the many new developments and policies that have emerged."

16. In the context of its new strategy in this area, UNDP will fully implement this recommendation. In so doing, it will bear in mind the comments made by other ACC members, including in respect of the scope of the responsibilities of focal points and coordination mechanisms at the country level.

17. Many ACC members believe that, if a focal point is to be established in UNDP offices, that focal point should take into account concerns specific to the specialized agencies, e.g., the focal points should distinguish and give equal weight to rural and urban-oriented NGOs and employers' and workers' organizations. Some ACC members would prefer the option of establishing, under the authority of the United Nations resident coordinator, an inter-agency committee at the country level; the responsibility of the committee for liaising with NGOs should be shared, in accordance with their mandates and technical competence, among the United Nations system organizations and programmes represented in the country.

18. Some ACC members underscored the need for updating the UNDP guidelines on promoting effective NGO involvement in dialogue with Governments.

Recommendation 6

"The Secretary-General should update and issue an extensive but uncompleted 1988 management review of NGO involvement in Secretariat operational programmes, and then formulate an overall policy and framework for the many United Nations programmes that work with NGOs."

Recommendation 7

"The General Assembly might wish to request the Secretary-General, in consultation with other organizations of the system, to analyse and update existing procedures for special conferences in order to encourage greater participation of NGOs and other groups in special regional and global conferences on development issues and thereby help ensure popular participation in policy formulation on these issues."

19. ACC noted that this recommendation was addressed to the General Assembly of the United Nations.

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